

Russian-inspired montage method which virtually all modern film theorists seem to consider the basis of the art. Bazin makes an impressive case for their being equal but opposing currents in filmmaking, calling deep focus "a dialectical step forward in the history of film language." In his words, a film shot in depth "would permit everything to be said without chopping the world up into little fragments. It would reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them." It would be a film, he suggests, that would reintroduce the possibility of ambiguity on the screen—a film, in short, that would be admirably suited to the presentation of the works of Shakespeare.

Many of the advantages of the deep focus method have to do with what Bazin refers to as "the relationship of the mind of the spectator to the image," and are especially evident in *Hamlet*.

On the most basic level, the image simply appears to be less flat than with regular photography; that is to say, the spectator perceives it more as in reality. Thus, even though Olivier was admittedly simplifying the original, shooting in depth provides that essential touch of realism which keeps the film, with all its fantasy and symbolism, from turning Shakespeare's immortal tragedy into a mere fairy tale.

Less obvious but just as significant is the fact that deep focus requires more active participation than is normally expected of a movie audience. *Hamlet* contains many long continuous scenes during which the filmgoer, almost like a playgoer, finds he has to choose what to look at, rather than having it cut up and spoon-fed to him Russian-style. Long shots of Laertes' speech in the first scene, for example, may include simultaneous significant action on the part of Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet, or any of the other courtiers as well as Laertes. This may indeed account for the richness of multiple viewings of the film. But the theatre analogy goes only so far, since a movie audience can simply see more than its theatre counterpart. Small but essential details like the rosemary on the chair or the unbated foil would be lost on the theatre-goer (especially one in the second balcony), even with spotlights.

Nor is the filmgoer, like the theatre-goer, confined to his seat at an invariable distance and angle from the action. Through manipulation of point of view, a film viewer can easily be made to identify with the camera, and in *Hamlet* the camera, not content to be a mere observer, often becomes one of the actors. In the Play-within-the-Play scene, for example, with the camera on a semicircular track behind the courtiers, the spectator feels as though he himself were moving to and from just inches from the actors. This same technique is used to achieve a comic effect when Polonius recites Ophelia's letter from Hamlet for the King and Queen. Because of the placement of the camera, we seem to be directly behind and between the royal couple, and each time we go in one direction, the silly old man goes in the other. This role of the spectator as actor via the camera is not as clear or consistent as in *Richard III*, where Olivier virtually puts his arm around the camera, in his own words, "as if I'd just come to town with

—a conflict which has certainly had interesting effects on stage performances such as Othello, but which seems to me to be most creatively resolved in the films he directed. "I have only directed four films," he has admitted, "and it's the nearest thing I've ever felt to being creative."¹⁸ In *Hamlet*, it is the artful blending of these opposing tendencies by means of the cinematography itself, and not merely the personal magnetism of the star or the relative raciness of the Freudian interpretation, that accounts for the film's long-lasting and universal appeal.

¹⁸Meryman, p. 93. This comment was made in 1964, before Olivier had directed *Three Sisters* (1971).

it,"¹⁶ but it is pervasive enough to assure him of the audience's all-important complicity.

Audience participation in the film is encouraged especially by the constant movement of the camera. Shooting in depth permits a freedom of movement that is invaluable in keeping long but beautiful and important speeches, like Hamlet's soliloquies, from stagnating in what is essentially a visual medium—a problem very much compounded by an audience largely unfamiliar with Shakespeare. The treatment of the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, with the camera bouncing from the castle to the sky and down to the ocean, may seem overdone to some of us but Olivier evidently considered it insurance against drowning his audience in a long speech at this critical moment.

Still the camera moves so much in *Hamlet* that Olivier was accused of making a "travelogue" or a "pseudo-documentary on architecture,"¹⁷ rather than a Shakespearean film. It moves so much that pillars and staircases had to be built on wheels enabling them to be spirited out of the camera's path at a moment's notice. But again the excess is justified. For what happens is that by the end of the film, the spectator is so familiar with the castle at Elsinore that he feels like he's lived there. In direct contrast with Richardson's *Hamlet* (1969), where frequent cuts and soft-focus close-ups completely disorient the audience, Olivier's cinematography gives us a secure sense of familiarity. Even though the walls have an alarming tendency to change position, Olivier's castle retains a definite reality. We feel we know exactly where we are as soon as we catch sight of a certain fresco, a familiar pattern on the floor, or a particular configuration of arches. And the music, with its haunting *leit-motifs*, reinforces the effect subliminally.

Interestingly, when the camera isn't moving and the filmic world is suddenly shattered into fragments, as it is during the confusion after the play sequence, the result is especially dramatic. As Bazin predicts, this rare example of montage in the film does seem to function by contrast. In fact, if the courtiers' reactions seem to border a bit too closely on the melodramatic, it may be because the abrupt change in the style of the cinematography places undue emphasis on this sequence.

To sum up then, while Olivier's *Hamlet* may in some ways appear to be in danger of floating off into a Never-Never Land of poetry and fantasy, the fact that it is shot in depth keeps it firmly anchored in reality. And since the seas in 1948 were fraught with both Shakespeare-doubters and new advocates of Italian Neo-Realism, such an anchor was indispensable.

Furthermore, the style of the cinematography resolves the conflict between the poetic and the realistic in Olivier's own approach to Shakespeare

¹⁶Roger Manvell, "Laurence Olivier on Filming Shakespeare," *The Journal of The British Film Academy*, n.v. (Autumn 1955), p. 5.

¹⁷See John Mason Brown, "Olivier's *Hamlet*," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 2 October 1948, pp. 26-27; and Parker Tyler, "Hamlet and Documentary," *Kenyon Review*, 3 (Summer 1949), 527-32.

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